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United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations

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Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The General Assembly, by its resolution 53/22 of 4 November 1998, decided to proclaim 2001 as the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations and invited Governments, the United Nations system, including the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and other relevant international and non-governmental organizations to plan and implement appropriate cultural, educational and social programmes to promote the concept of dialogue among civilizations, including through organizing conferences and seminars and disseminating information and scholarly material on the subject, and to inform me of their activities. In its resolution 55/23 of 13 November 2000, the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit to it at its fifty-sixth session a substantive report on the prospect of dialogue among civilizations and the activities pertaining to the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations.

2. The idea of a dialogue among civilizations has engendered wide interest at the level of academic institutions, non-governmental organizations and international institutions. UNESCO has been particularly instrumental in fostering this interest by holding conferences and seminars together with Governments, civil society and other United Nations organizations in many countries. These events have been held across the globe in such countries as Andorra, Austria, Canada, Costa Rica, Cuba, Egypt, Germany, Jordan, Latvia, Mali, Poland, Portugal, the Republic of Korea, Switzerland and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Dialogue among civilizations has also been selected as a strategic objective by UNESCO for its medium-term strategy covering the period 2002-2007, a reflection of the organization's commitment to this process.

3. My personal representative for the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations, Giandomenico Picco, has worked together with the Director-General of UNESCO and with a number of eminent persons who have accepted my invitation to provide a substantive contribution to this important dialogue. They have recently submitted to me the result of their collaborative work, a book entitled *Crossing the Divide: Dialogue among Civilizations* (see annex I for a list of contributors).

4. A number of Governments, including Austria, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, Germany, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Japan, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Lithuania, Madagascar, Mongolia, Poland, Saudi Arabia, the Russian Federation, Tunisia and Venezuela, have transmitted to my Personal Representative a compilation of their ongoing activities pertaining to the dialogue in their respective countries.

* The present report was delayed to include more reports of permanent missions.

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Other Governments have replied to a note verbale of 1 August 2001 requesting information about the activities they had undertaken or encouraged in response to the General Assembly resolutions. A list of the countries replying is annexed (see annex II).

5. Great interest has also been expressed by Governments and leading public figures around the world for a renewed effort at all levels of society to encourage a dialogue among civilizations in the years ahead. This is reflected in the fact that my Personal Representative and the meetings of the Group of Eminent Persons have received major support from the Governments of Austria, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Ireland and Qatar. One Government, Switzerland, has contributed financially to the trust fund set up for the Year. Academic and non-governmental organizations have also provided generous logistical and financial support to my Personal Representative and to the work of the Group of Eminent Persons.

II. Report on activities

6. A number of Member States have launched a series of major events and activities in celebration and support of the International Year of Dialogue among Civilizations. The Government of Austria hosted the inaugural meeting of the Group of Eminent Persons on the Dialogue among Civilizations in December 2000 in Vienna. This was followed in August 2001 by the Salzburg dialogue among civilizations: a new paradigm of international relations, which was opened by the Secretary-General and which issued a document entitled "Salzburg reflections" (see A/56/419). The Dialogue will continue in the Vienna Christian-Islamic round table, planned for February 2002.

7. To celebrate the International Year of Dialogue among Civilizations, German federal ministries and representatives of civil society selected 90 projects to represent Germany's contribution. Those projects are being executed by a vast array of civil society organizations, including large institutes, schools and small non-governmental organizations. In the main, the projects seek to document, launch discussions and exchange opinions among all social groups, both within Germany and abroad. The German Institute of International Relations has also issued a special edition on different opinions on the role of culture as an instrument for conflict prevention. Germany will also be hosting the International UNESCO Conference on cultural policy as a global task, which will be held from 16 to 18 November 2001 in Berlin. The conference will focus on the global dimension of culture and include such topics as cultural diversity, conflicts and pluralism.

8. The Government of Japan sponsored the 2001 Global Youth Exchange Programme, in which 40 young people from around the world were invited to Japan to exchange views on issues from a global perspective. The meeting, which was held in March 2001, focused on the theme "dialogue among civilizations — from a century of conflict to a century of coexistence". The outcome of the discussions is contained in a "message for the twenty-first century from the global youth", which was submitted to the Rector of the United Nations University for delivery to the Secretary-General. Japan is also reaching out to other regions by sponsoring, for example, a seminar on education and protection of cultural heritage in South-Eastern Europe, held in March 2001, which aimed at seeking measures to achieve harmony among ethnic groups through education and the protection of the cultural heritage of that region. In addition, the Government has launched a dialogue among civilizations with the world of Islam. One of its key activities is the building of a network of academics and think tanks in Japan and Islamic countries that will seek to enhance mutual understanding through the exchange of personnel.

9. The United Nations has also been actively involved in promoting dialogue among civilizations. UNESCO, a key agency in promoting the dialogue, has carried out a broad range of activities in cooperation with Member States and other intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations. Major events sponsored by UNESCO include the International Congress on Interreligious Dialogue, held in Tashkent from 14 to 16 September 2000 in the framework of the UNESCO projects entitled "spiritual convergence and intercultural dialogue" and "East-West intercultural dialogue in Central Asia", and the International Conference on Dialogue among Civilizations, held in Vilnius from 23 to 26 April 2001 under the auspices of the Presidents of Lithuania and Poland and the Director-General of UNESCO.

10. The Conference brought together political leaders, decision makers, scholars and artists from more than 20 countries and 4 continents for an exchange of views and experiences to help find better

ways of building mutual understanding among all peoples based on common concepts of tolerance, solidarity and cooperation. Issues ranged from "plural identities and common values" to "globalization and cultural diversity", "otherness" and "trade, science and cultural exchange". Its outcome was the Vilnius Declaration (A/56/87, annex).

11. The United Nations University also organized a series of workshops, conferences and other events, including an essay contest for children, entitled "Dialogue Beyond Borders". Reflecting the global perspective of the University, the conferences and workshops brought together persons from diverse cultural backgrounds for in-depth discussions aimed at developing a better understanding of what is necessary to realize a meaningful dialogue among civilizations. Of note was a series of workshops to facilitate in-depth discussions on cross-cutting issues in preparation for the International Conference on the Dialogue of Civilizations. These included workshops on themes such as the contributions of science, the media and communications, education, ethics and leadership.

12. The International Conference on the Dialogue of Civilizations was held from 31 July to 3 August 2001 in Tokyo and Kyoto. Drawing on speakers from 23 countries, the Conference explored a number of issues, including lessons from history, multicultural society and cultural transformation, perspectives from Asia, universality versus particularity and the political aspects of the dialogue among civilizations.

13. The conferences and activities looked at means of facilitating dialogue and suggested that, in addition to face-to-face encounters, traditional and new media along with multicultural education could be vital in promoting dialogue. Dialogue can be strengthened if we take advantage of science as a medium through which we discuss and debate and if we focus a substantial part of our efforts on youth. Because of its shared body of knowledge and a common understanding at the technical level, science provides a forum for the exchange of information based on shared goals and interests. There is no doubt that significant differences exist in attitudes to and usage of modern science. If we ensure that the diversity of values and beliefs is also respected, science can be a useful tool for dialogue even when it has been discouraged or denied at the political level.

14. What are the prospects for future dialogue? According to the results of these conferences and activities, the prospects are positive if we fully understand that cultural and religious diversity is a source of strength, not a cause for division and confrontation. The prospects for dialogue will be even better if we understand that the goal of dialogue is not to impose one's viewpoints or even to reach consensus. Dialogue is possible if we accept that we live in a diverse world but share the same values of tolerance and freedom, a world that respects universal human rights. The results of our interaction will be successful if we engage in respectful dialogue, where we do not pass judgement on other cultural norms before examining our own. We can draw lessons from history to see how and why some inter- or cross-civilizational exchanges have been successful and others have not. We can also identify best practices from contemporary experiences. Most importantly, Governments have to exercise the necessary political will to ensure an ongoing dialogue among various groups in society that it is carried out at all levels, from local and national to regional and international, involving all who are traditionally under-represented in political decision-making, especially women and youth.

15. The conferences and activities have also shown that the United Nations remains the natural home of dialogue among civilizations; the forum where such dialogue can flourish and bear fruit in every field of human endeavour. Without this dialogue taking place every day among all nations — within and between civilizations, cultures and groups — no peace can be lasting and no prosperity can be secure.

16. One of the important topics for the ongoing dialogue among nations is globalization. Understanding the constant interaction between the global and the local in all spheres of contemporary life, we all must ensure that the benefits of globalization are more equally distributed so that the injustices that are so often linked to the process are not seen to be affecting only certain groups of people. It is also critical that globalization not reflect the triumph or victory of one ideology or cultural or economic system over another. Indeed, it is important that cultural diversity be preserved in the dynamic interaction among cultures in the process of globalization.

17. Dialogue among civilizations is essential if we are to be successful in achieving one of the main objectives of the mission of the United Nations, that is,

to prevent conflicts. By creating understanding and mutual respect, we can reduce misunderstanding and mistrust and put in place the basis for non-violent resolution of conflicts. Dialogue is also important to the other half of our mission — promoting development. By sharing experiences and jointly seeking solutions, we can solve current and future economic and social problems that affect us all.

III. Why dialogue? Why now?

18. A final report on this question was to be submitted at this stage. Yet how the present report can be called final may be hard to imagine. The events of this year may have drawn the attention of many to the necessity, indeed the imperative, for a dialogue among civilizations.

19. The Group of Eminent Persons appointed to explore these themes has completed its work and has presented me with the aforementioned book. While the text is not a United Nations document per se, it provides an opportunity to reflect on a number of changes that seem to be occurring in the international community. It provides no recommendations, but rather some observations about new trends that may be emerging in the international system. Those trends may be nurtured or may be destroyed. That is up to each of us. This is all the more true in the aftermath of the 11 September terrorist attacks, which represented the worst of humanity, whereas the dialogue seeks to enable and promote the best in humanity. A dialogue among civilizations is not only a necessary answer to terrorism — it is in many ways its nemesis. Where terrorism seeks to divide humanity, the dialogue aims to unite us; where terrorism is based on an exclusionary, belligerent view of the world, the dialogue seeks to promote inclusion and acceptance of the notion that the possession of truth does not belong to any one group alone. Where terrorism seeks to make our diversity the source of conflict, the dialogue can help make that same diversity the foundation for betterment and growth.

20. *Crossing the Divide* contains a provocative stimulus to go beyond the limits of what many of us have imagined so far. It is my hope that the book will help form the basis for further progress in the direction of dialogue — both among and within Member States. Dialogue does not mean appeasement of the arrogance of violence or the arrogance of might. It is open to all and should be based on the fundamental principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations. These already represent the common denominator of values we all share, regardless of colour or creed, and should give all people faith in the ability of the dialogue among civilizations to become a means to lessen the fear of diversity and serve as a tool in the ongoing struggle against terrorism. It may be a soft tool of diplomacy but, in the long term, it can prevail.

Annex I

Contributors to *Crossing the Divide: Dialogue among Civilizations*

Crossing the Divide: Dialogue among Civilizations **(South Orange, NJ: Seton Hall University School of Diplomacy and International Relations, 2001)**

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Annex II

Reports reviewed in response to General Assembly resolutions on the International Year of Dialogue among Civilizations

A note verbale was sent by the United Nations Secretariat to permanent missions to the United Nations on 1 August 2001 referring to General Assembly resolutions 53/22, 54/113 and 55/23, entitled "United Nations Year of the Dialogue among Civilizations".

Thus far, the following permanent missions have submitted their reports: Austria, Germany, Finland, Japan, the Philippines and Portugal.